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ABSTRACT

One popular trend in the American school reform movement is the notion of school and teacher empowerment. This paper sketches various definitions of teacher empowerment and associated terms, presents key issues, identifies certain strengths and weaknesses, encapsulates recent evaluation and research efforts, and lists traditional and newer methodologies used in teacher empowerment assessment. Recent research has demonstrated that what happens in the individual school determines the quality of student learning. Many school districts are decentralizing decision-making so that greater authority and responsibility are placed directly in the individual school. Although the term "teacher empowerment" may be new, experiments in giving teachers responsible local autonomy have occurred in Detroit, Michigan; Dade County, Florida; San Diego, California; Louisville, Kentucky; Richmond County, Georgia; and others. Recurring teacher empowerment themes in the literature include teacher centers or institutes, collaboration, linkages, ownership, collegiality, mentoring, isolation, and context. Strengths of teacher empowerment include recognition and nurturance of teachers as true professionals, improved teacher-administrator relationships, and principals' freedom to engage in more teacher consultation and outside agency collaboration. Weaknesses include principals' fear of losing power, conflict with labor contracts, lack of time and money, conflicts with accountability goals, and teacher complacency. One of the greatest weaknesses is the lack of substantive research linking student achievement to teacher empowerment. (27 references) (MLH)

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WHAT RESEARCH TELLS THE PRINCIPAL ABOUT TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION

> There can be little dispute that the most effective principals are those whose teachers have ownership in the mission of the school.....
>
> ---Erlandson and Bifano, 1987
> NASSP BULLETIN

One of the popular trends in the American school reform movement is the notion of school and teacher empowerment. This paper will: (1) sketch various definitions of teacher empowerment and associated terms; (2) present key issues; (3) identify certain strengths and weaknesses; (4) present capsules of recent evaluation and research efforts; and, (5) list traditional and newer methodologies utilized in teacher empowerment assessment.

Recent research (eliminating Coleman (1966) and Jencks (1972)) has demonstrated that what happens in the individual school determines the quality of student learning. Even though the context of the educational workplace is complex and highly interactive, there are certain conditions and factors which teachers and principals can control. Teachers can share their expertise with one another; principals can seek out the advice of teachers when planning school improvements. Many school districts are now employing a management concept which decentralizes decision-making so that greater authority and responsibility are placed directly in the individual school.

Local decision-making has many names: site-based management, shared governance, school-based management, school-based power, school-based improvement, and empowerment.

DEFINITIONS AND ASSOCIATED TERMS

The term "teacher empowerment" is fairly new in educational literature; the concept of responsible local autonomy for teachers is not new. Over the past twenty years, many attempts to give teachers status in the decision-making process of a school's operation can be documented: Detroit Public Schools; Dade County, Florida; San Diego; Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky; Richmond County, Georgia; and, others. Teacher empowerment promises a more professional, autonomous role for teachers. According to Maeroff, teacher empowerment is synonymous with professionalism and means that teachers are given status in the workplace, are stimulated to be lifelong learners as they expand knowledge in their respective specialities, and participate actively in school decision-making by way of groups or committees according to their competencies.

Some authors (e.g., Guthrie) see empowerment as a managerial arrangement reflecting the ideas of Theory Z; others (e.g., Lightfoot) view empowerment as a point of view or mind set that produces behaviors which result in autonomy for teachers and principals to solve local problems in an unencumbered way.

Some recurring terms or themes found in the literature of teacher empowerment are these:

----Teacher Centers (locations sponsored by the school district and a nearby college or university where teachers can learn about assertive discipline, critical and creative thinking, meta-cognition, and other approaches which will enrich day-to-day classroom management and inspire teaching)

----Consortium (a somewhat loose partnership between the schools, or between schools and institutions of higher learning or agencies to promote cooperation and sharing of facilities and resources)

----Collaboration (formal association of the school with universities, businesses, laboratories, museums, or other storehouses of knowledge

for updating teachers' acumen and skills in step with current practice)

----Linkages (coordination of various units within the school or school district)

----Professionalism (encouraging teachers to view their profession as worthy of high standards and respect; in order to become true professionals, teachers must aspire to achieve status by profiting from experience and honing their skills to a high degree, characteristic of workers in other professions)

----Ownership (feeling of belonging in the school, willing to organize, manage, and assume the risk of an enterprise--to be entrepreneurs in the workplace as limited partners)

----Collegiality (participating in an enthusiastic exchange of ideas with peers as opposed to airing complaints and dissatisfaction)

----Risk-taking (willingness to try out new, creative ideas, to promote innovation, and to live with occasional failure)

----Listening (training people to pay close attention to divergent ideas, to tolerate positions other than their own)

----Mentor (a friend and critic of new or experienced teachers; mentoring works best when there is a personal, psychological, and professional subject-matter match between the teacher and mentor; mentors may be other teachers or the principal)

----Isolation (the condition of working alone in the classroom with only students as intellectual stimuli--this condition is common in secondary education)

----Context (the full school setting--physical surroundings, subject matter to be taught, socio-economic and racial composition, skills and motivation of teachers, management style in the building, relationships between teachers and principals, teachers with teachers, community perceptions, internal and external pressures)

These factors and conditions directly impinge upon efforts toward empowerment.

Many consider the language of empowerment to be jargon or patois. Realistically, what policies, procedures, and practices have to be altered to implement empowerment at the school level? Illustrative of questions which arise are these:

----How are members of a school empowerment team selected?

----What can actually be done for and with teachers to improve their: status?

----What degree of flexibility is possible?

----Will the school district support departures from traditional practice?

----What about accountability?

----What about linkages and coordination?

----Who determines curriculum and instructional strategies at the school?

----Who determines staff development needs at the school?

----How will teachers benefit from collaboration with outside agencies? What are the plans for follow-up and evaluation?

----Will teachers be scheduled to provide time to participate in seminars, workshops, field trips, training sessions? Are paraprofessionals available to handle routine tasks such as clerical, lunch, and hall duties?

----Will teachers be expected to invest in summertime training sessions?

----Are there sufficient funds and other resources to free teachers from the non-instructional rigors of the classroom?

----To what extent will parents be involved in empowerment processes?

----In short, how will empowerment concepts be made operational?

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

Strengths

----Gives teachers the recognition and status to exercise their craft with confidence, to re-shape the job to be done

----Principals engage in more teacher consultation and outside agency collaboration

----Transfers routine teacher responsibilities to trained paraprofessionals through revised scheduling, thus permitting teachers time to be involved in curriculum planning, textbook selection, and helping new teachers

----Teacher unions may become more sympathetic and better partners in the school enterprise

----A trained school planning team learns to work together in an atmosphere of collegiality

----In settings where empowerment works, the leadership of the principal is strengthened

----There is participation by all stakeholders

----Is a linking agent to research centers

----Staff comes to believe in itself and its students

----Teachers are given growth opportunities early in their careers thus motivating them to stay in the profession

----Teachers learn self-criticism, the power of dialogue, and profit from certain discomforts in terms of professional growth

----School administrators learn to treat teachers in a friendly and collegial manner

----In an environment of shared commitment, teachers develop a sense of ownership; their levels of expectations are raised; they are willing to try out new practices

----Problem solutions can be initiated "bottom up" rather than "top down"

Weaknesses

----Careful structure is necessary so that teachers do not assume the functions of the principalship

----Weak leadership at the building level will give rise to chaos when teachers usurp the principal's responsibilities

----Principals may fear loss of power

----Where one stands on the hierarchical ladder determines perceptions of teacher empowerment (e.g., superintendents may say that they support teacher empowerment, whereas principals may feel that superintendents actually do not)

----Central office foot-dragging; limited funds

----When there is a breakdown in linkages among and between units and with the district (e.g., ordering and obtaining supplies) teacher empowerment is ineffective

----Accountability and teacher empowerment may come into conflict in regard to goals and objectives; these are best left to the school district

----Tradition: the public expects teachers to carry on along established lines in regard to course content, teaching methods, state and national test score achievement, grading

----Local politics also have an impact on empowerment efforts; lack of time and money impedes empowerment

----Teacher empowerment does not necessarily produce better learning--there is little or no research to link student achievement to empowerment

----Teacher equity issues

----Teacher complacency: lack of teacher interest, apathy, lethargy; teachers more often than not oppose change, and therefore, may ignore efforts to establish new ways of doing things

----Scheduling problems to insure teachers' released time or "free" time within the school day

----Some teachers are not suited for collegiality and may rebel against forced decisional involvement

----Labor contracts (formal waivers may be necessary to circumvent the language in union contracts)

----Teachers may resent having to give up summer vacation time to training or re-training enterprises

EVALUATION AND RESEARCH REPORTS DEALING WITH TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

Following are brief sketches of evaluation and research reports related to issues of teacher empowerment.

Science Education (J. Myron Atkin, Stanford University - 1989)

In a recent report entitled Improving Science Education Through Alliances, Atkin presents an evaluation of collaboration between public schools and "science rich" institutions such as universities, private businesses, museums, and other external agencies. Commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation, this study documents over 500 existing science alliances using a case study approach. Secondary science teachers are provided with updated training in the biological and physical sciences. Leading scientists act as consultants to schools which enroll a high concentration of disadvantaged minority students. Results of this study are, in the main, positive.

Classroom Research or Action Research (Christopher Day, Nottingham, England - 1988)

Day studied the validity of classroom research (also called "action research") in terms of teacher professionalism and empowerment. He found that unless teachers have a personal and professional involvement in the research design and the outcomes of classroom observations, there will be problems in dissemination, adoption, and utilization of research findings.

Shared Governance (Vicki Karant - 1989)

Karant studied three schools practicing shared governance and found that supervision and empowerment are compatible. The keys are patience and the supervising administrator's commitment to shared decision-making.

Teacher Empowerment and Teacher Education (Mary E. Diez - 1989)

Diez studied relationships between teacher empowerment and knowledge bases in teacher education programs. She found that teachers are capable of making judgments using theory, knowledge of child development, cognition, curriculum, and assessment. Teachers must command their subject matter well and know the principles of teaching. Motivation for lifelong learning must have top role models in the teacher training programs.

Principals' Perceptions of Teacher Empowerment (Paul V. Bredeson - 1989)

Bredeson studied principals' perceptions of the effect of teacher empowerment on their roles as building administrators through structured interviews. Among the conclusions were these: (1) the necessity of understanding the language of shared governance or empowerment; (2) teacher readiness for professional growth; (3) the importance of superintendent leadership; (4) time as a key resource; (5) enhancement of teacher and principal images in the community; (6) the importance of listening; and, (7) sharing professional thinking as a positive outcome.

ISOLATION (Karla Rice - 1987)

Teachers remain encapsulated in classrooms and do not take their places as first-class citizens in the American educational system in spite of a multitude of plans and models for empowerment.

Mentoring (Rita M. King - 1988)

King studied key relationships in a mentor teacher program in Southern California through qualitative interview data. Teachers who worked with mentors felt more positive about themselves and their teaching and learned new techniques. Mentors became better teachers themselves. Two criteria influenced whether teachers and mentors worked well together over time: (1) the mentor's building rapport and trust; (2) the teacher's perception of the mentor's teaching skills.

Empowering Teachers (AERA Symposium, San Francisco - Ann Lieberman, Chair - 1989)

At the Annual Meeting (1989) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), a two-hour taped symposium featured an in-depth look nationally at programs and plans. Highlights included a review of the work of the Scarsdale Teachers Institute, a research and development center whose mission it is to increase leadership opportunities inside and outside the classroom for new and tenured teachers. Under the aegis of the Institute, teachers administer programs, develop seminars, hire consultants, determine bugets.

Teachers engage in classroom (or action) research. Neophytes in research are guided by more experienced colleagues. Mentoring was highly recommended for pre-service and in-service teachers. According to the speakers at this symposium, empowerment means training teachers to think of themselves as "powerful" - to take charge of their own growth.. The work of the Institute attempts to fill the gap between research and practice in its teacher training. Classroom Isolation is thus reduced when teachers become leaders and have a sense of power. The re-structuring of teacher education programs was also recommended.
Vignettes of school-college-university collaboration were also presented. Examples included the work of the University of Washington and the Kent Public Schools. In collaborative efforts, it is crucial for the field practitioners to define the problems for study, to insure a healthy on-going partnership. Teachers (practitioners) feel empowered when they are trained to work cooperatively with researchers (university personnel) and school administrators to improve classroom learning. Barriers between the various rungs on the educational ladder are then diminished.
Also introduced at this symposium was the methodology of portraiture as a collaborative tool to capture teacher-administrator leadership in action.

METHODOLOGIES IN USE

Methodologically speaking, a scan of evaluation and research studies indicates that many traditional research techniques were utilized to collect and analyze data relating to teacher empowerment. These included survey methods, case studies, classroom or action research designs, interviews, and documentary analyses of diaries, journals, or field reports.

A newer methodology called Portraiture, attributed to Sara L. Lightfoot, Harvard University, appears to have power and promise in probing school cultures.

Portraiture is a descriptive technique designed to capture the culture of a place or context of a person in action over a short period of time. It has some resemblance to ethnography and deals largely with qualitative data. As employed in the Washington University-Kent Public Schools study, participants played three roles: teacher, learner, and decision maker. Each worked on a deliberation team. One purpose of the

plan was to catch principals and mentors in action. Triangulation (three person teams) was employed. Principals (24) and mentors (17) were the subjects of the investigation. The teams observed, collected anecdotal data (from teacher and principal talk), interviewed, content analyzed journalistic accounts and diaries, and used other artifacts to construct portraits. This research technique proved to be attractive to teacher-researchers, and encouraged professionalism.

Portraiture has its roots in the arts and sciences. It provides opportunities for investigators to clarify perceptions, to collaborate about language and meaning, and to come to an understanding of the culture of the school. As a tool, portraiture has the capability of assessing tolerance for ambiguity in school persons while also capturing feelings. All of this is ultimately synthesized in broad-stroke portraits. In short, portraiture is a technique which re-constructs someone else's perception of what a person is about, and how this contributes to the larger canvas....the school context.

Portraiture has a time advantage. In the Washington/Kent study, portraits of the 14 mentors were completed in one day; portraits of the 24 principals took somewhat longer.

Themes which emerge from this study were concerns for equity, strong teacher advocacy, the fruits of tolerance and patience, critical prowess, and the "power to break the paradox of familiarity --that is to make the familiar unfamiliar" (Lightfoot)!

CONCLUSION

Teacher empowerment has indeed made a strong impression nationally. Philosophically, empowerment ideas are tenable. On the other hand, many research efforts appear to be thin, casual, and heavily

reliant on qualitative data. Needed are more rigorous quantitative studies as well as more longitudinal investigations. The difficult connection between teacher empowerment and student learning has still to be made. Do students learn more effectively in the classrooms of empowered teachers? This critical question has yet to be answered.

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NASSP 74TH ANNUAL CONVENTION - SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Session Title: What Research Tells the Principal About Teacher Empowerment. Speaker: Dr. Claire C. Irwin, Professor Em., Educational Evaluation and Research, College of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202. Date: Saturday, February 17, 1990.

ABSTRACT (Journalistic Summary)

One of the popular trends in the American school reform movement is the notion of school and teacher empowerment. Recent research has demonstrated that what happens in the individual school determines the quality of student learning. There are certain conditions and factors which teachers and principals can control. Teachers can share their expertise with one another; principals can seek out the advice of teachers when planning school improvements. Many school districts are now employing a management concept which de-centralizes decision making so that greater authority and responsibility are placed directly in the individual school.

Local decision-making has many names: site-based management, shared governance, school-based management, school-based power, school-based improvement, and empowerment. The term "teacher empowerment" is fairly new in educational literature; the concept of responsible local autonomy for teachers is not new. Over the past twenty years, many attempts to give teachers status in decision-making processes can be documented: Detroit Public Schools; Dade County, Florida; San Diego; Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky; Richmond County, Georgia; and, others. Teacher empowerment promises a more professional, autonomous role for teachers. According to Maeroff, teacher empowerment is synonymous with professionalism and means that teachers are given status in the workplace, are stimulated to be lifelong learners, and participate actively in school-decision-making according to their competencies.

Some authors see empowerment as a managerial arrangement reflecting the ideas in Theory Z; others view empowerment as a point of view or mind set that produces behaviors which result in autonomy for teachers and principals to solve local problems in an unencumbered way.

Recurring themes in the literature of empowerment are these: teacher centers or institutes; collaboration; linkages; ownership; collegiality; mentoring; isolation; and, context (the full school setting).

Strengths of teacher empowerment include the recognition and nurturing of teachers as true professionals with better relationships to the school administration while permitting principals to engage in more teacher consultation and outside agency collaboration. Weaknesses include the principal's fear of loss of power; conflict with labor contracts; lack of time and money; conflicts with accountability goals; teacher complacency. One of the greatest weaknesses is the lack of substantive research to link student achievement to teacher empowerment.

Present research is heavily reliant on qualitative research which may not be generalizable. Needed is more rigorous quantitative and longitudinal studies to connect teacher empowerment to student progress and to the excellence of the school.